

In closing, I thank our schools, teachers, parents, and children for all they have done in the past 2 years, without the Congress' help, to lower the level of violence in our schools. But I regret that this Congress has failed to do its work to provide the additional resources and reforms that would have been helpful and reassuring to our children, parents, grandparents, and teachers at schools. It can be better. It is unconscionable if we do not do better.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

THE RURAL SATELLITE TELEVISION BILL

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I understand that my friend from Mississippi, the distinguished majority leader, may propose a unanimous consent request regarding the rural television loan guarantee bill which I have been working to get passed for many months. If the consent request actually offered is the one I have seen, I will have to object when that happens. I will explain why now so I don't hold up the distinguished leader when he comes to the floor.

As a conferee last year on a major satellite television bill—the Satellite Home Viewer Improvement Act—I worked hard to include, along with other Senators, a provision that would have assured that rural Americans were not left out of the benefits of that Act. I teamed up with other Senators to include a title that would have allowed USDA to provide loan guarantees to companies that wished to offer local-into-local television to rural Americans. We wanted to do this so that rural families would be able to receive their local network television stations over satellite, or other service, along with the full range of other programming. We wanted rural families to be able to get local news, local weather warnings and local programming but recognized that without a loan guarantee program that might never happen.

In other words, we wanted to share the benefits of that bill that would go to urban areas to rural Americans also through a loan guarantee program. I know many parts of rural America would not have the benefits of it without a loan guarantee program. It is similar to what we did in my grandparents' time to bring telephone service and electricity to rural areas.

As a Conferee, I originated the rural satellite guarantee program to be ad-

ministered by USDA when I was a conferee on the satellite TV bill. Unfortunately, one of the Senate committee chairmen objected to that provision and insisted that it be pulled from the Conference Report. To date, we have been unable to resolve this matter and regain the ground we lost last year. I know the distinguished junior Senator from Montana, Senator BURNS, took an early leadership role in this matter. His colleague, the distinguished senior Senator from Montana, Senator BAUCUS, introduced legislation with me last year also on this issue. We did this to show bipartisan support.

I want to work with all Members on this. The reason I would make such an objection, if it were done the way I have been told, is that to do otherwise I would have to abandon rural America, and I don't intend to do that. As a product of rural America, I feel my roots there very deeply. Ironically enough, this could have already been law by today. There is a simple solution. A lot of Republicans and Democrats agree on this. We can send a great rural satellite loan guarantee bill to the House by working together. I think that could be passed by unanimous consent. Or, we could enact a final bill by a Senate amendment to the House-passed bill. We could do that in the time it would take to get the conferees together to meet.

I am concerned that a conference would delay this process until the end of the year and result in denying rural Americans local-into-local television—the same kind of satellite local-into-local television urban residents now enjoy. I use as an example the electronic signature conference. That showed how difficult a conference can be and it shows how long a conference can take. That conference took way more time to finish than we have left to devote to any rural satellite conference. In addition, the Congress has to pass at least ten major appropriations bills or else there could be another government shutdown. In this case, the proposal would leave two key committees off the conference.

Regarding the e-signature conference, when we finally got the right mix of conferees and followed proper procedures, we still had many struggles before we finished a strong e-signature bill that has been applauded by both businesses and consumers. However, this time around we do not have time because the Congress is going out of session soon.

But we clearly have time to enact this rural satellite bill. My staff provided draft language to many of the Republican and Democratic offices months ago in order to help resolve this matter. I urge the majority leader and the Democratic leader to call a meeting so we can resolve this important issue and send a clean bill over to the House without wasting time. I sus-

pect it would be passed very quickly, with very strong support from the rural areas of our country.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SESSIONS). Without objection, it is so ordered.

MEDICARE

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I want to very briefly continue a discussion that was held earlier on the floor today addressing an issue that means not only a great deal to me but also to about 35 million seniors in this country as well as 5 million individuals with disabilities. That is the issue of Medicare.

Our obligation, I believe, is to modernize Medicare and give those seniors and those individuals with disabilities what they deserve; that is, health care security as we know it is or should be in the year 2000, not the sort of health care security that was appropriate for 1956, back when Medicare began.

The challenge before us today as a body and the challenge before the American people is really pretty clear; that is, how to best implement a real plan for real people, those seniors and those individuals with disabilities—not just a piece of legislation but a real plan that will modernize Medicare in a way that will give them real health care security.

A lot of individuals with disabilities and a lot of seniors out there don't really realize how antiquated and out of date the current Medicare system is. I would like to make several points.

First of all, I believe modernization of Medicare today where it can truly offer health care security is really a moral obligation that we have to our seniors.

Second, under the leadership of Clinton/Gore, we have had really 8 years where a lot of opportunities have been squandered, and they simply have not led, if we look at this field of Medicare modernization.

Third, we have to ask ourselves in terms of how best to modernize. If we have an old jalopy that still is running along and still gets us from point to point, do we just want to put new gas in that car—we know it is going to eventually fail—or do we want to go ahead and modernize that car so that it will still get us from point to point but it will do so more efficiently and effectively in a way that will give us security and not just get us there but get us there with the very best quality?

First of all, modernization of health care is a moral obligation. Why do I say that?